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By Ken Dilanian

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton won a small diplomatic victory here recently. Few Americans are likely to have heard about it.

The issue was Cuba, and the details were arcane. Clinton and her team, in negotiations on the sidelines of the Organization of American States assembly, persuaded 33 other governments not to allow Cuba back into the OAS without a process that respects the group's charter language on democracy.

It wasn't easy. Most of the assembly, frustrated with the USA's desire to isolate Cuba, wanted to lift the 1962 suspension without conditions. Ted Piccone, a Latin America expert at the Brookings Institution, called it "a great win for the State Department."

Clinton wasn't around to mark the occasion, however. She left before the deal was reached for Cairo, where she sat in the audience applauding President Obama's address to the Muslim world. Media coverage of that speech eclipsed the few news accounts about Clinton's efforts in Latin America.

If that sort of dynamic bothers Clinton, she hasn't let it show. A year after conceding the Democratic nomination to Obama, and four months after becoming his secretary of State, the former first lady and New York senator has settled into her next act: a supporting role as the top diplomat for a president who is his own global ambassador.

"I feel very much in the center of helping to devise the policies, carry out the policies, pick the people who will implement the policies," Clinton tells USA TODAY during an interview in El Salvador. "I see the president every week. We spend a lot of time talking."

Clinton says she had no inkling Obama would ask her to be secretary of State. She resisted, "but the president is very persuasive." The decision was "a difficult transition in some respects,

because I never even dreamed of it."

She took the job in challenging times, to say the least: Among her tasks is to stop Iran's nuclear program, curb Pakistan's Islamic insurgency, preserve post-war Iraq as U.S. troops leave there, and help new U.S. forces in Afghanistan with civilian projects. Clinton also has to deal with an unpredictable, nuclear-armed regime in North Korea, which sentenced two U.S. journalists to 12 years hard labor this week and continued saber-rattling in the face of new U.N. sanctions.

How Clinton and the Obama administration will fare in dealing with those thorny problems is unclear. But so far, even Republicans give Clinton high marks for tackling management challenges at the State Department, using her political skills to boost the USA's image abroad and avoiding signs of tension between her circle and the White House. The "team of rivals" story line, much discussed when Clinton was first appointed, hasn't played out.

In Washington, Clinton has been "one of the less visible secretaries of State in recent history," says Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi of the Israel Project, a pro-Israel advocacy group. Obama has been his own foreign policy spokesman, sometimes with Clinton standing quietly behind him. Some days, one of the many special envoys gets more attention than she does. Clinton made her first Sunday morning news show appearance as secretary of State just a week ago.

Don't be fooled by appearances, Vice President Biden says: Clinton is making a difference behind the scenes.

"I think (the president) listens to her as much or more than anybody," Biden tells USA TODAY. "She's the main player ... the one he looks to give the last wind-up pitch about what should be done."

Biden says Clinton's view prevailed over his own during a policy debate about sending additional troops to Afghanistan. Biden declined to go into details, but Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., a Naval Reserve officer with contacts at the State Department and Pentagon, says Biden opposed sending 21,000 additional troops and Clinton favored it.

"It turned into Biden vs. Hillary, and she crushed him," Kirk says.

Biden calls that an exaggeration and says their differences were small. "It is true that Hillary was very forceful, I had some disagreement in degree with her ... and the president ended up landing on a spot that was where she was."

Kirk, who is on the subcommittee that oversees the State Department, calls Clinton "the superstar of the Cabinet. Everything she touches is well run."

Grunt work and budgets

Much as she did in 2001, when she first entered the U.S. Senate and was establishing herself in that position, Clinton is spending part of her time on what amounts to grunt work. Though traveling frequently, she's also focused on securing a big budget increase to hire more diplomats and pushing to overhaul the way the USA distributes foreign aid, a subject full of pitfalls.

"The fact she is not in the headlines every day not only doesn't seem to be bothering her. She looks maybe the happiest she's seemed in her entire career," says Kristen Lord, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank with ties to the Obama administration.

During her Senate confirmation hearings, Clinton promised to harness what foreign policy wonks call "smart power" — U.S. economic and cultural influence — to make diplomacy "the vanguard of our foreign policy."

She assembled a senior team at State that is a mix of political aides and career diplomats. Her chief of staff is Cheryl Mills, a longtime confidante who defended President Clinton during his impeachment trial. She kept Russia specialist Bill Burns as undersecretary for political affairs.

With the help of Jack Lew, a one-time budget director under President Bill Clinton whom she brought on as deputy secretary for management, Clinton got the administration to seek a 10% increase in the foreign affairs budget, enough to boost aid and hire thousands more diplomats. That could end up being her biggest legacy, Lord and others say.

It's also made Clinton very popular among State's 57,000 employees, says John Naland, head of the union for diplomats.

Despite their differences in the primary, Clinton hasn't hesitated to adopt the positions of her boss. When a Republican congressman reminded her during an April hearing that she had criticized Obama for pledging to meet with rogue leaders — the context was Obama shaking hands with Venezuela president Hugo Chavez— she replied, "President Obama won the election. He beat me in a primary in which he put forth a different approach."

The big picture

Clinton says it was her idea to appoint special envoys for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Middle East peace process, Iran and North Korea. They didn't have to be confirmed by the Senate, so they could get to work immediately. The envoys free Clinton to focus on the big picture — and also on different parts of the world.

"She doesn't feel in any way squeezed or threatened by them," says Strobe Talbott, president of the Brookings Institution and a Clinton friend. "She understands that these are monster problems, and while she has not shied away from being involved in them, it's just plain smart for her not to roll up her sleeves and do the week-in, week-out work that's required there."

Says Biden: "It's clear to everybody that the envoys work for her." With the envoys in the hottest spots, Clinton has focused some of her travel in overlooked areas such as Latin American and East Asia.

On those trips, she has set a new tone. She often acknowledges what she sees as past mistakes by the United States — to the delight of her audience. And she's booked a series of

campaign-style public appearances that she calls "people-to-people" diplomacy, an effort to shore up the flagging U.S. image.

On her first trip to Asia, for example, she held town hall meetings with students in Tokyo and Seoul and appeared on a popular Indonesian teen television show called "Awesome."

"There is a hunger for the United States to be present again," Clinton told reporters during the trip. "Showing up is not all of life — but it counts for a lot."

Fixing foreign aid

After spending eight years as a senator, Clinton has been unusually blunt for a diplomat.

She made headlines in April when she said Pakistan had "abdicated" to the Taliban (she now praises the government's military assault on the radical group), drawing criticism from the Pakistani author Ahmed Rashid, who wrote that her remark "provoked increasing anti-Americanism in the Pakistani army and public."

Clinton says her comment, designed to send a message, spurred Pakistan to action.

Clinton has also spoken frankly about what Talbott and others say could become a major focus of her tenure: Her desire to overhaul the uncoordinated and often ineffective American foreign assistance programs, many of which are delivered through private contractors.

During the campaign, Obama promised to double foreign aid to \$50 billion a year by 2012. But Clinton acknowledges that the main aid agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) — which she oversees — is straining to manage the huge contracts it administers.

On her plane to Europe in March, she told reporters that aid programs in Afghanistan spent billions with little to show for it. Among her entourage on the aircraft were two top USAID officials who had worked as Afghanistan country directors during the Bush administration.

"We have to hold ourselves accountable. We owe it to the American taxpayer," Clinton tells USA TODAY. "We can't go to people who have lost their job at GM and say, 'Oh, by the way, we are going to pay money to build a road here or inoculate children there,' unless we can demonstrate that it is in America's interest. I happen to think it is. ... But we've got to make sure that it is delivered effectively and that we can justify it."

She adds: "I want to rebuild USAID. I want to see it become again the premier aid agency in the world."

If the good reviews continue, there will be inevitable speculation about another run for the White House. Clinton would be 69 in 2016 — three years younger than John McCain was last year.

"I would be real surprised if she ever ran again," political analyst Charlie Cook says. "I think that when she took this job, she chose to go a different course. This scratches a different itch."